2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 SI7 Mataco SI7

RELIGION.

CHAPTER XII.

Belief in gods and spirits in general.

I have mentioned before that the religion of the Chaco Indians is a subject strangely neglected by all who have travelled among these natives and studied their customs. Thus, in regard to the Tobas, the naturalist Azara arrived at the conclusion that they have no religion at all, and d'Orbigny rested satisfied with stating that »their religious beliefs are very limited», whereas the Catholic missionary Cardús considered the study of these things useless. Similarly, nothing — apart from the data published by myself — has been related of the religious ideas of the Choroti and Ashluslay. Almost the only author on the Chaco Indians who gives us some information about their religion is Barbrooke Grubb, but he deals exclusively with the ideas and customs of the Lenguas of Paraguay.

The main reason for this deficiency of our information respecting one of the most important sides of native culture is obvious. The subject of religion, if one has a real study of it in view, requires special training and a prolonged stay among the natives, and these conditions have been lacking in the case of most »ethnographic» travellers in the Chaco, not to speak of naturalists or ordinary travellers. But even to one who devotes special attention to the spiritual aspect of Indian culture the study of such a subject as religion is beset with great difficulties, and the study can hardly ever become exhaustive. Although this may undoubtedly be said of my own contribution also, I venture to believe that in the following account at any rate the most important religious ideas and customs of the Pilcomayo Indians are mentioned.

The lowest tribes of the Pilcomayo, the Choroti, Mataco, and — as far as I have been able to ascertain — the Ashluslay, have no belief in a supreme god, nor any ideas of a creation. Beliefs of this kind are extremely

114
776
773
[p. 109]

2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 S17 Mataco S17
Toba S112
Choroti SK6

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rare in all South America, and in the Chaco they are found only among such an advanced tribe as the Tobas, and, in a certain sense, among the Lenguas. The latter Indians, according to Mr. Grubb, ascribe the creation of all things and of man to a being disguised as a beetle, but this being is without moral attributes and in fact is only of purely mythological interest. As to the Tobas, they believe in two high gods or Supreme Beings, who — just as is the case with the Creator-Beetle of the Lenguas — only figure in their mythology but play no rôle in their practical religion. Moreover, the ideas they entertain about these Supreme Beings are not consistent but seem to represent two different stages in the evolution of their religious thought. These beings are especially spoken of as the creators of the world and of mankind. According to the apparently older version, all things were made by a bad deity Kaloaraik, »The Evil One», who created the world as miserable and full of suffering as it actually is in the mind of the Tobas. Again, according to the younger version, the world owes its origin to a good deity Peritnalik, who created things good and useful and thenceforward took benevolent care of mankind.

Since no kind of worship is paid to these Supreme Beings they have more interest from a mythological than from a religious point of view. I shall therefore deal with them again in a later chapter in connection with other myths of the Tobas.

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In practical religion spirits of a lower order play the main rôle. Of these spirits some are in their nature good, others again bad, but — as is usual among savage peoples — the latter impress the mind of the Indians more than the former and are therefore more conspicuous in their religion. The Choroti call these spirits *möhsek*, the Ashluslay *eitché*, the Mataco *aittah* or *nahút*, and the Tobas *peyák*. In examining the different applications of this belief in spirits, we find that to the primitive Indians it is obviously of great practical importance: it compensates them for the lack of a notion of natural laws. Stupendous phenomena of nature, events otherwise unaccountable to them, especially disease and death, are explained as their mysterious actions. There are spirits inhabiting inanimate objects of nature and heavenly bodies, there are spirits embodied in animals and plants, and lastly, there are spirits who are not particularly attached to things animate or inanimate but have an independent existence, hovering about in the forests or on the plains, or in the air, causing such phenomena as thunder and lightning, eclipses of the sun and the moon, drought, devastating hurricanes, etc. Worst of course are those demons who are regarded as the causes of disease and death, and

3: Metraux
539, 773 ●

SI7 Mataco SI7

[For myths and folklore, see pp. 9-89, category 116.]

3: Metraux E-5 (1933) 1939 SI7 Mataco SI7

of the dead the *āhat* hunts, gathers fruit and goes fishing for food. When he arrives at the abode of the dead, his people come to meet him and they take him to their house. 775

6) The dead inhabit a region of their own situated under the one we live in. When it is daylight here it is dark in their region. [772]

The *āhat* sleep during the day and at night search for food. They feed on dead animals and fish. Their life is exactly the same as that of living persons. They have underground fields and lagoons. They cultivate the earth the same as we do, raise animals and go fishing.

The *āhat* fight each other like the living Bolivians and Paraguayans do. The spirits of the Matako are at war with those of the Toba.

7) A dead person is called an *āhat*. The *āhat* live in the bush and appear only at night. We do not know exactly what they do in the bush nor what they eat. Some of them may be good. The medicine-men may talk with them and learn what is going to happen. For instance, they predict disease and future death. [787]

8) When a man sees an *āhat* he will die unless he is a medicine-man. When a person is dying an *āhat* comes and steals his fire. [761]

9) When the north wind blows very hard, the *āhat* leave their abode and walk about the earth looking for uninhabited places. If they see a man they vanish under the earth, but sometimes they are seen from afar. Frequently the *āhat* transform themselves into the north wind, which brings storms. [821]

10) If you dream that you are visiting the land of the *āhat* and one of them invites you to eat, you must refuse. If you accept you may die during the following year.

II. The Medicine-men and the Big Fire

A medicine-man may call on the Big Fire at the end of the world. On the journey he crosses first a rainy area and then he comes to a dark zone where it is impossible to see. 756 773

To pass through this darkness the medicine-man changes into a species of owl (*sinalčǫ́*). This is a bird who travels by night and whose eyes are like lanterns. In this disguise he is able to fly in the dark. After crossing the dark area he changes himself into a (white aquatic bird with red-circled eyes. When he arrives at the Big Fire's house he changes himself into a *carancho* and in this last disguise he calls on the Big Fire. They get acquainted and are very friendly. Later the *carancho* changes himself into a beautiful and well dressed woman. Big Fire is on good terms with the beautiful woman. Soon she becomes a man again. Big Fire asks the medicine-man if there is much bush in his country. The medicine-man takes care not to mention straw, bushes or trees, otherwise Big Fire will eat them up. The medicine-man goes home.

III. The Medicine-men

A man who wants to become a medicine-man must eat raw dog flesh. Ordinarily the candidate slays a young pup eats its flesh, and buries its head and skin very carefully.

Medicine dances are taught the prospective medicine-men by demons or spirits who give them their power. The *welán* are the spirits who are the most inclined to instruct men in the art of magic. The ordinary method in this procedure is as follows: The soul of a man is ravished by a *welán* and shut into a tree. There the man's soul remains captive and the *welán* teaches it the language of the spirit, then the *welán* blows on the prospective medicine-man and he thus acquires the power to treat sick people who come to him, using the same method. Medicine-men are constantly in touch with the spirits. They meet them at night and talk with them. The spirits have a stick called *laḳaaLoi* which contains their souls and this they give to their friends, the medicine-men.

Some women may acquire medical knowledge, but the Indians never consider them as smart as male doctors.

3 Metraux E-5 (1933) 1939 SI7 Mataco SI7

may kill him. The snake's *ăhat* is called *punsoya* (perhaps Spanish-ponzoña : poison).

When a man is bitten by a snake he must kill the reptile and take it home in order to be cured rapidly. If he has been bitten while away from his home, he must dig a groove and put the snake into it, facing it in the opposite direction to that which he is taking. Thus the snake cannot enter him.

Tawkxwax taught the men the procedure to be followed in order to cure snake bites.

XII. How to Become a Singer

Those who want to become good singers must go to the bush and stay there for quite a long time. They must kill birds who are good singers and eat them after they have been made into powder and mixed with blood extracted from the arm. When they are in the bush they must first beat a drum, then run. Thus they will perhaps dream about a singing bird. When they wake up they must then take their drums and sing the song they heard in their dreams. One must not awaken until the song is finished or he will not remember it. Everyone has two songs and he must sing them every day in order to learn them. Ordinarily several young men go to the bush and after they have dreamed of a song they sing one after another. Generally three or four days are sufficient to master a song.

One must not sing someone else's song. If after one has eaten a bird he dreams of an iguana, it is no longer worth while to go on, for he will never become a good singer. The birds one dreams about and who teach one how to sing are not ordinary birds, they are *paata* (supernatural beings). The women do not know how to sing but they can cry when they have to mourn. Not all women know how to weep. In order to weep well, a woman must dream about another woman who is a good mourner. There are some exceptional women who can sing.